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WASHINGTON'S GRIST MILL AT HEART OF FAYETTE COUNTY HISTORY

Uniontown, PA – George Washington has long been synonymous with Fayette County's history, but a volunteer organization is working to shed light on a lesser-known part of his local legacy.

Today is Presidents' Day, a federal holiday celebrated annually on the third Monday in February, honoring the first United States President Gen. George Washington, born Feb. 22; and 16th U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, born Feb. 12.

While Fayette County's National Road Heritage Corridor, Fort Necessity Battlefield, Washington's Tavern and countless other Washington-related sites are must-see stops on any history buff's road trip, the Perryopolis Parks & Recreation Authority (PPRA) hopes to soon add the late president's grist mill to that list.

As part of the PPRA's Pre-Industrial Revolution Historic District – one of the only original pre-industrial sites remaining nationwide – the George Washington Grist Mill was constructed in the 1770s off of what is now Galley Street, under the direction of Washington's associate Gilbert Simpson. At that time, Washington owned more than 1600 acres called Washington Bottom in what is now Perryopolis. The facility, which still boasts its external water wheel, milled grains between 1776 and 1918, during a time when communities were self-sustaining.

With Washington at the forefront of the American Revolution, he leased the mill and 150 surrounding acres to Col. Israel Shreve, another Revolutionary War icon, in 1779. Both men died in 1799, without Washington having formally conveyed the land to Shreve. The mill changed hands several times over its nearly 140 years of operation.

In 1968, the PPRA took ownership of the mill and more than 120 surrounding acres in what is now the historic district. PPRA President Kathy Kifer said the group is also responsible for Shreve Distillery, a fulling mill, the Smith Bakery, several cabins, a playground, pavilions and more – all located in and around the mill complex.

"I love history and, living here, we're really connected to it. At that time, people didn't have that many ovens, so they would get their wheat ground up at the mill and take some of it over to the bakery that we're currently renovating to have it made into bread," Kifer said. "As for our future endeavors, we recently rewrote our mission statement and had a needs assessment done. We're working towards developing a master site plan for the complex, which will help us prioritize how we move forward in restoring the mill and ensuring it adheres to government regulations."

Kifer said the group is applying for grants that will allow for installation of railings along steep walkways and other improvements to make the mill site more accessible and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant. The PPRA is also working with Perryopolis Borough Council to get the complex an official historical district designation.

“If we establish it as a nationally recognized historic district, we’ll hopefully be able to bring new businesses into town. Our property touches the bike trail and we’re hoping with the new master plan we’ll be able to connect to it and finally become an official stop on the GAP trail,” Kifer said. “Right now, anyone biking through has to work really hard to get to us, so by having that historical designation, it will open the door to new types of funding that can help us make the necessary connections.”

The Great Allegheny Passage – also known as the GAP trail – is a 150-mile rail trail connecting Pittsburgh, Penn. to Cumberland, Md. Running right through the heart of many Fayette County communities, the trail attracts thousands of cyclists, hikers and other tourists each year.

PPRA member Devan White echoed Kifer’s sentiments, adding that the borough’s “wonderfully large, historic, underutilized park” is “perfect” and “could not only be something great for our residents, but could pull people into our town from the region and beyond.”

“The master plan will give our community and the public the chance to voice their thoughts on what’s important about the park and the historic buildings, like the mill. We would love to have the mill and other buildings open on a regular basis for people to be able to schedule tours and history walks,” White said. “We’ve received proposals back from a few engineering firms for the master plan, and we are still in the decision phase. We want the borough, township and community to all be behind us and involved in this effort.”

Kifer said the PPRA also hopes the master site plan will allow future members to continue prioritizing and completing the district’s upgrades, long after some of their older members retire.

“It’s important to preserve sites like the grist mill because they’re so easily destroyed. For over 100 years, people took stones away from its foundation and things like that,” Kifer said. “The wheel has been rebuilt over the years, and the water is no longer there, but one of our biggest tourism draws is still the nearby stream called Washington Run. The water was diverted from the stream to the mill when it needed it, but it was mostly steam-powered in its later decades of operation.”

As amateur historians, the PPRA wants everyone – especially local youth – to “know why people came here; why they were moving west; and what they were trying to do” during the American Revolution, Kifer added. The PPRA partners with the Frazier School District’s eighth grade classes each year, leading students on a walking tour of local historical sites.

“George Washington owned all this land in Perryopolis. It spread far and wide. It’s just beautiful, and our local history is wonderful. History should be exciting,” she said. “It’s really the story of our past and how people overcame so many obstacles to give us the backbone that we should be able to strive to move forward today.”

PPRA members are appointed by Perryopolis Borough Council for five-year terms. The group currently schedules tours of the Pre-Industrial Revolution Historic District by appointment only. For more information, call 724-497-3201.

“We’re in such a connected spot, and very few places can actually say, ‘George Washington was here. He built this. This happened here,’” Kifer said. “I really want to see this through, because it could be a great thing for the borough and the county. After all, if you don’t preserve what has come before, then how do you know how to move forward?”

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettcountypa.org.

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